

**IDENTIFICATION DU SUJET**

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EXAMEN

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Enseignant responsable : David FEE

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Oraux : L'épreuve écrite est suivie d'un oral

 OUI NON

Your columnist detected a similar spirit of exuberant defiance in Nick Clegg, leader of the Liberal Democrats, at his party's annual conference in Glasgow this week. His situation was also unpropitious. Forming a coalition government with the Conservative Party in 2010 has been disastrous for the Lib Dems. As the junior partner in an unpopular, cost-cutting government, Mr Clegg is widely considered cruel and weak. He has been spat at in the street. Dog excrement has been posted through his letterbox.

Opinion polls suggest that, against stiff competition, he is Britain's most disdained political leader. They also suggest a third of his party's voters have deserted, mostly to the Labour Party. At local elections last year the Lib Dems lost half their councillors—hugely important functionaries in the assiduous and locally informed parliamentary campaigns by which the party has built a cohort of 56 MPs. On the eve of the Glasgow gathering, there were whispers of a possible leadership challenge. Yet Mr Clegg's response, issued in the unlikely setting of an ugly convention centre beside the Clyde river, was positively Bugtian.

He did not apologise to the assembled faithful. He challenged them, in effect, to grow up. Typically middle-class, left-leaning and prone to idealism, the Lib Dem rank-and-file has the unusual privilege of voting to decide the party's policies. This is admirable. Bagehot, a Lib Dem conference greenhorn, was uplifted to see the grey-haired gentlefolk of Somerset, Devon and other Lib Dem shires debating, with strong views and unerring good manners, the finer points of fiscal policy and defence. But this system has led the party to some hare-brained and often illiberal positions, some of which have proved embarrassing in government. The Libs Dems have had a long-standing aversion to civil nuclear power, for example, while at the same time campaigning to decarbonise the energy sector. Mr Clegg, whose mission is to bring

his party to the centre and make it fit to rule, asked his party to reconsider such positions. On almost every count he got his way.

The Lib Demmers repudiated their former enthusiasm for free and unaffordable university education, for unilateral and dangerous nuclear disarmament, for the politically difficult task of raising taxes on high earners. Against the wishes of Mr Clegg's main challenger, Vince Cable, the business secretary and champion of the party's left, they issued a thumping endorsement of the coalition government's austere economic policies. Even Mr Cable did, having failed in a half-hearted effort to absent himself from the vote. Thus was Mr Clegg's enemy driven before him.

This was heavy weather for the party faithful, mind. Holding quixotic positions has traditionally represented at least half the fun of being a Lib Dem. "We're becoming boring," sighed a delegate from Somerset, after reluctantly raising a tweed-clad hand to endorse what is for him and most of the country hard-hearted, Tory austerity. Nor, it must be said, was much love for Mr Clegg apparent in the auditorium's rows of worn seating. Too cocky for one so widely disdained, too unfunny for such a dedicated wise-cracker and, ultimately, too right-wing for most in his party, Mr Clegg is more admired than liked. Yet having hardly expected to see power, the Lib Dems, it turns out, rather like it. This—and only this—is why they are following Mr Clegg to the centre ground he has staked out for them.

He is impelled by more than conviction. Once an oddity in Britain's traditionally two-party system, hung parliaments could soon be the norm. With the rise of fringe parties, the British vote is becoming increasingly fractured. Peter Kellner, a pollster, sees an 80% chance that neither the Conservatives nor Labour will secure a majority in Britain's next general election, due in 2015. So long as the Lib Dems retain a fair slab of their seats—which is possible, given their mastery of campaigning, notwithstanding their poor polling—they may again be called upon to make a government. Treading a careful line between the two big parties—"equidistance", in the buzzword—should make Mr Clegg a plausible ally, he trusts, to either potential suitor.

It is one thing to be prepared, in response to electoral failure, to accept an ally. That is the Tories' take on the coalition and, if they win in 2015, it would be Labour's. It is quite another to define oneself, as Mr Clegg has done, as an adjunct to bigger parties. He naturally sought, in a closing speech that was as much about his rivals as his own party, to pitch that as an advantage. "The absolute worst thing to do would be to give the keys to Number 10 to a single party government—Labour or the Conservatives."

The Economist, 21/09/2013

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